Louis XIV of France and Absolutism

Absolute monarchy or absolutism meant that the sovereign power or ultimate authority in the state rested in the hands of a king who claimed to rule by divine right. But what did sovereignty mean? Late sixteenth century political theorists believed that sovereign power consisted of the authority to make laws, tax, administer justice, control the state's administrative system, and determine foreign policy. These powers made a ruler sovereign.

One of the chief theorists of divine-right monarchy in the seventeenth century was the French theologian and court preacher Bishop Jacques Bossuet (1627-1704), who expressed his ideas in a book entitled Politics Drawn from the Very Words of Holy Scripture. Bossuet argued first that govemment was divinely ordained so that humans could live in an organized society. Of all forms of gov ernment, monarchy, he averred, was the most general, most ancient, most natural, and the best, since God established kings and through them reigned over all the peoples of the world. Since kings received their power from God, their authority was absolute. They were re sponsible to no one (including parliaments) except God. Nevertheless, Bossuet cautioned, although a king's au thority was absolute, his power was not since he was limited by the law of God. Bossuet believed there was a difference between absolute monarchy and arbitrary monarchy. The latter contradicted the rule of law and the sanctity of property and was simply lawless tyranny. Bossuet's distinction between absolute and arbitrary gov emment was not always easy to maintain. There was also a large gulf between the theory of absolutism as ex pressed by Bossuet and the practice of absolutism. As we shall see in our survey of seventeenth-century states, a monarch's absolute power was often very limited by practical realities. ...

The day after Cardinal Mazarin's death, Louis XIV, at the age of twenty three, expressed his deterrnination to be a real king and the sole ruler of France:

Up to this moment I have been pleased to entrust the gov emment of my affairs to the late Cardinal. It is now time that I govem them myself. You [secretaries and ministers of state] will assist me with your counsels when I ask for them. I request and order you to seal no orders except by my com mand, . . . I order you not to sign anything, not even a passport . . . without my command; to render account to me personally each day and to favor no one.

His mother, who was well aware of Louis's proclivity for fun and games and getting into the beds of the maids in the royal palace, laughed aloud at these words. But Louis was quite serious.

Louis proved willing to pay the price of being a strong ruler . He established a consci entious routine from which he seldom deviated, but he did not look upon his duties as drudgery since he judged his royal profession to be "grand, noble, and delightful." Eager for glory, Louis created a grand and majestic spec tacle at the court of Versailles (see Daily Life at the Court of Versailles later in the chapter). Consequently, Louis and his court came to set the standard for monar chies and aristocracies all over Europe. Less than fifty years after his death, the great French writer Voltaire used the title "Age of Louis XIV" to describe his history of Europe from 1661 to 1715. Historians have tended to use it ever since....

Although Louis may have believed in the theory of absolute monarchy and consciously fostered the myth of himself as the Sun King, the source of light for all of his people, historians are quick to point out that the reali ties fell far short of the aspirations. Despite the central izing efforts of Cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin, France still possessed a bewildering system of overlapping au thorities in the seventeenth century. Provinces had their own regional parlements, their own local Estates, their own sets of laws. Members of the high nobility with their huge estates and clients among the lesser nobility still exercised much authority. Both towns and provinces possessed privileges and powers seemingly from time im memorial that they would not easily relinquish. Much of Louis's success rested less on the modernization of ad ministrative machinery, as is frequently claimed, than on his clever and adroit manipulation of the traditional priorities and values of French society....

Instead of the high nobility and royal princes, Louis relied for his ministers on nobles who came from rela tively new aristocratic families. Such were Michel Le Tellier, secretary of state for war; Hugues de Lionne, secretary for foreign affairs; and Nicholas Fouquet, su perintendent of finances. His ministers were expected to be subservient; said Louis, "I had no intention of sharing my authority with them." When Fouquet began to flaunt the enormous wealth and power he had amassed in the King's service, Louis ordered his arrest and imprisoned

The maintenance of religious harmony had long been considered an area of monarchical power. The desire to keep it led Louis into conflict with the French Hugue nots and the papacy. Louis XIV did not want to allow Protestants to practice their faith in largely Catholic France. Perhaps he was motivated by religion, but it is more likely that Louis, who believed in the motto, "one king, one law, one faith," felt that the existence of this minority undermined his own political authority. His anti-Protestant policy, aimed at converting the Hugue nots to Catholicism, began mildly by offering rewards, but escalated by 1681 to a policy of forced conversions. The most favored method was to quarter French soldiers in Huguenot communities and homes with the freedom to misbehave so that their hosts would "see the light quickly." This approach did produce thousands of imme diate conversions. In October 1685, Louis issued the Edict of Fontainebleau.

In addition to revoking the Edict of Nantes, the new edict provided for the destruction of Huguenot churches and the closing of their schools. Al though they were forbidden to leave France, it is esti mated that 200,000 Huguenots left for shelter in En gland, the United Provinces, and the German states. Through their exodus, France lost people who had com mercial and industrial skills, although some modern scholars have argued this had only a minor impact on the French economy. Perhaps a more important effect of the Huguenot dispersal was the increased hatred of France that the Huguenot emigres stirred up in their adopted Protestant countries. Whatever his motives, Louis's anti-Protestant policy was not aimed at currying papal favor. Louis was a de fender of Gallicanism, the belief that the monarchy pos sessed certain rights over the Catholic church in France, irrespective of papal powers. In the 1670s, Louis claimed the regale or the right of the French king to appoint the lower clergy and collect the revenues of a diocese when it was vacant. Pope Innocent Xl condemned Louis's ac tions, threatening him with reprisals. Louis responded by calling a special assembly of French clergy and direct ing them to draw up a Declaration of Gallican Liberties. This document claimed that the pope's authority in France was limited to spiritual matters and that even in spiritual matters, the pope was subject to the decisions of a general council. The pope protested this challenge to papal authority and the possibility of a schism loomed large. But neither side wanted to go that far. After In nocent's death, a compromise was arranged, and by 1693 the Gallican articles had been retracted.

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